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ACTION NEA-00

INFO	LOG-00	AID-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	DODE-00	EAP-00	EB-00
	EUR-00	UTED-00	VC1-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00
	VCIE-00	NSAE-00	ISN-00	NSCE-00	OES-00	OIC-00	OMB-00
	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	P-00	ISNE-00	SP-00	SS-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0307
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY RIYADH
AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
USLO TRIPOLI
AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000082

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

1. (SBU) Summary: Southern and central Vietnam's 30,000- to 50,000-member Sunni Muslim community does not appear to face significant restrictions in its ability to worship. Unlike Vietnam's five other recognized religious organizations, the Muslim community does not have a national leadership to manage relations with the GVN or address overseas cooperation; Ho Chi Minh City's (HCMC) representatives take on such a role on an informal, ad hoc, and sometimes conflicting basis. Vietnamese Sunni Muslims receive financial, material and educational support from overseas Cham Muslims, Persian Gulf states, Egypt and Libya, although reports of the scale of assistance are inconsistent. Vietnam also is home to 40,000 Bani Muslims - practitioners of an indigenous form of Islam - who are seeking independent recognition from the GVN under the country's new legal framework on religion. End Summary.

Islam in Southern Vietnam

2. (U) Over the course of 2005, ConGenOffs held a series of meetings with representatives of the Muslim community in southern and central Vietnam. ConGen officials met with Musa Haji, Chief Representative of the Cham community in An Giang Province, in May and December. PolOffs called on the Representative Board of the Islamic Community of HCMC, led by Machdares Samael, Vice President and spokesperson for the HCMC Islamic Community Board, in October and December 2005, as well as with Nao Du, Vice-Hakim of Mosque 104, Imam Chau Van Ken of Mosque 101 and Cham Bani Muslim cleric Tu Cong Du in Ninh Thuan Province in December 2005 (protect all).

3. (U) According to Samael, Sunni Islam has roughly 50,000 followers in Vietnam, clustered primarily in the southern and central provinces of An Giang, Ninh Thuan, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai, Binh Phuoc, Binh Duong, Tra Vinh and HCMC. The two largest communities are in HCMC and An Giang, with 8,000 and 13,000 members, respectively. The vast majority of Sunni Muslims are of the Cham ethnic minority, although in HCMC, ethnic Indonesians, Malaysians and Indians make up a quarter of the Muslim population. Islam is one of Vietnam's six officially-recognized religions.

4. (SBU) HCMC and An Giang also are the only two provinces to have GVN-recognized Muslim representative boards; as a result, these two boards, especially HCMC's, recognized since 1992, have become the de facto national representatives of the Muslim community in Vietnam. Creating a national Islamic organization is a top priority for Vietnamese Muslims. According to HCMC Islamic representatives, the GVN will not recognize a formal national organization of Sunni Muslims until Sunni communities in other provinces gain provincial recognition first.

5. (SBU) All the Muslim leaders we spoke with said that they enjoyed positive relationships with their respective local governments. They had no complaints of GVN attempts to limit religious practice or the teaching of Islam. HCMC representative board member Samael praised the HCMC government for providing USD 25,000 to rebuild his mosque in addition to the USD 75,000 compensation to his mosque for land lost in a road-widening project. Muslim leaders also responded positively to questions about the impact of the new legal framework on religion, noting, for example, that they no longer have to ask permission for, but only to notify provincial authorities of, students studying overseas or community members traveling to

Mecca for the Hajj.

Conflicting Accounts of Overseas Support

16. (SBU) According to Samael, funding for community projects, such as rebuilding of mosques, typically comes from the local Muslim community and overseas Cham in the U.S., France and Australia. For example, the 3,000-strong Cham community in the U.S. helped fund the rebuilding of one of HCMC's mosques through their donations of USD 7,000. Another mosque in An Giang was rebuilt in 2000 largely through donations from the Cham communities in Indonesia and Malaysia. Other mosques appeared to have less lucrative connections; Islamic representatives in Ninh Thuan, who are seeking to build a new mosque, complained that Cham relatives in the U.S. had difficulties raising or sending money back to Ninh Thuan, and attributed problems to post-9/11 restrictions. Samael, however, said he had never heard of any such fundraising problems.

17. (SBU) In our meetings, Samael failed to mention foreign contributions towards the building of Vietnam's largest mosque in Dong Nai Province (near HCMC). In a series of phone conversations in January 2006, Mohamed Yousof (strictly protect), the HCMC Representative Board Member responsible for finances, told us that the Red Crescent Society of Abu Dhabi provided USD 95,000 of the USD 176,000 cost needed to build the Dong Nai mosque, which just celebrated its opening in January 2006. When asked about the mosque in an earlier phone conversation, Samael claimed that Yousof was a "maverick" who had independently found financing for the new mosque. Samael implied that the funds may have come from "bad sources." Yousof countered that although he had worked independently to secure the financing, Samael and GVN authorities knew about the project's funding, which was legitimate. According to Yousof, members of the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent Society visited Vietnam as tourists in 2001 and offered Yousof assistance. Actual funding comes from individual donors via the Red Crescent Society, which solicits donations for charitable causes. Yousof added that the Red Crescent Society also had provided USD 100,000 to fund the construction of an Islamic kindergarten in An Giang Province as well as for another mosque to be built in HCMC, information that neither Samael nor An Giang representatives shared with us.

18. (SBU) Community leaders also noted that other countries provide financial and material support to Vietnamese Muslims. Malaysia provides funding for textbooks and training in Vietnam and in Malaysia for Vietnamese clergy. The Saudi royal family has financed the publication in Vietnam of 3,000 Korans, which have been distributed by the HCMC Board to various Muslim groups around the country. Since 2001, the Saudi royal family also has sponsored the travel of 30 Vietnamese Muslims per year to attend the Hajj. At USD 3,000 per Vietnamese, the 12-day pilgrimage would otherwise be impossible for most Vietnamese. Additionally, the Saudi-based Islamic World League has sponsored the travel of five Vietnamese Muslims to Mecca every year since 1995. Samael noted that the United Arab Emirates sponsored approximately 30 Vietnamese Muslims to attend the Hajj in 2005, although he said he was not certain whether the funding was official or from private business sources in Dubai. Samael said that although the HCMC Board theoretically has responsibility for only the city's community, in practice, the board has been responsible for distributing the Hajj travel slots throughout Vietnam.

19. (SBU) An Giang Muslim leaders told the Consul General in December 2005 that nearly 100 Vietnamese Muslims make the Hajj annually, and that Saudi Arabia funds a substantial portion of that travel. In an earlier meeting, An Giang Muslim leader Musa Haji said that 49 individuals had traveled on the Hajj in 2004, 30 at the invitation of the Saudi royal family. He had no information on how the remaining 19 had paid for the trip.

Overseas Study

10. (SBU) Muslim community representatives also gave varying accounts of Vietnamese Muslims studying overseas. Samael said that prior to 2000, the Saudi Government had sponsored 18 students to study in Saudi Arabia, but that none had been sponsored since 2000. He initially said they had gone to study theology, but later stated that their major was science and technology, with a minor in theology. He added that some of these students had emigrated to the U.S. or France after finishing their studies; only four had returned to Vietnam. However, the Imam from Ninh Thuan Mosque 101 reported that one student from his community began studying in Saudi Arabia in either 2001 or 2002. He noted that the HCMC Board always notified Ninh Thuan mosques of overseas study opportunities and that Saudi Arabia and Libya send representatives every year to HCMC to recruit students.

11. (SBU) Samael added that, since 2000, Egypt has provided three scholarships and Libya five scholarships for Vietnamese Muslims to study science and technology in those countries.

Additionally, the Saudi Arabia-based Islamic Development Bank has provided loans for 20 students to study technology and telecommunications in Indonesia and Malaysia since 1995. Samael said that in theory, after the five or six year course of study in Indonesia or Malaysia, the students should return to Vietnam and repay their loans so that the HCMC Board can repay the Bank and sponsor new students. In practice, the eight graduates to date have not repaid the loans. Samael added that he hoped for more opportunities for Vietnamese Muslims to study economics, science and technology in the U.S. and other Western countries. Ninh Thuan representatives told us that three students from the community were studying religion, Islamic culture, and economics in Malaysia. Another two students from the province were studying in Libya.

¶12. (SBU) In a subsequent conversation, Samael said the Libyan and Egyptian Embassies notify the HCMC Representative Board regarding scholarships via GVN channels. No recruiters are involved. He could not explain how a student from Ninh Thuan received a Saudi scholarship after 2000. He then added that during his Hajj pilgrimage in 2004, he had met five or six Vietnamese Muslim students from Ninh Thuan. According to Samael, these Vietnamese students had studied Arabic in Cambodia for a few years then obtained Cambodian passports to travel to Saudi Arabia for further studies. He had no information about how these students had obtained Cambodian passports or funded their travel and studies.

¶13. (SBU) Samael added that the HCMC Board had refused scholarship offers in 1992 from Iraq, Iran and Algeria for fears of "bad" consequences. In An Giang, Musa Haji told us that he works closely with officials to ensure that "bad people" do not corrupt the community. He noted that radical Islamist propaganda had been spread via radio from abroad. Musa Haji emphasized his hope that Vietnam's Muslim community could maintain and improve its relationship with the United States.

The Bani Muslim Community -----

¶14. (SBU) Another 40,000 ethnic Cham in Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan provinces practice Bani Islam, an indigenous form of Islam. According to the Ninh Thuan and HCMC Sunni Muslims, the Bani observe only one of the five basic principles of Islam, namely accepting Mohammed as God's messenger. Sunni Muslim leaders told us that they do not consider the Bani "real Muslims," although the GVN frequently groups the Bani with the Sunnis. Bani cleric Tu Cong Du told us that the Bani would like the opportunity to travel to Mecca for the Hajj - another of the five principles - but that they receive no assistance. HCMC Sunni leaders said that once the Bani Muslims practiced all five principles, specifically fasting during Ramadan and praying five times daily, they would be eligible for aid to make the Hajj. Meanwhile, Du has organized the leaders of the seven Bani mosques in Ninh Thuan into a Representative Board and a 16-member Council of Clergy. In September, he applied for formal GVN recognition under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. The application remains pending. He has not yet received any updates, despite meeting monthly with the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: Vietnam's Muslim communities appear to be able to practice their faith with little overt government interference. Many details about Muslims' activities remain unclear and contradictory, in part reflecting the independence of, and lack of communication among, the various communities and their leaders scattered across southern and central Vietnam. (Even the size of the overall Muslim community is in doubt, with the HCMC board claiming 50,000 Sunni Muslims in 2005, but only 30,000 in 2002.) We will continue to seek clarification from contacts in the community on how overseas funding is managed and how students from Ninh Thuan Province might have obtained Cambodian passports. That said, GVN officials, including from the Ministry of Public Security, have told us repeatedly that they are keeping close tabs on the Muslim community and its outside links. End Comment.

¶16. (U) Minimize considered.
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